# KENTUCKY'S TREASURED HISTORIAN:
# THOMAS D. CLARK

by Linda Perry

It's fair to say that Thomas D. Clark is a dynamo, accomplishing more in one lifetime than most of us and showing no signs of slowing down, even at the age of 97. Kentucky's Historian Laureate has been called "A Kentucky Treasure," and has dedicated his life to collecting and preserving Kentucky's documents and artifacts. Clark is a firm believer in the value of all things connected to our heritage. He is the ultimate advocate for Kentucky's historical preservation. In his early years as a faculty member in the UK history department, this meant going through people's attics and rummaging through boxes of dusty documents. It also meant beating the drum to impress upon Kentucky's state government the long-term importance of maintaining an archival system. And in later years, after retiring with 37 years of UK service, it meant rallying support for such monumental projects in Frankfort as the construction of a facility to house the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, and the building of the Kentucky History Center.

Clark is a prolific author and it's been said that he has a gift for breathing life back into history. By 1965 he had already written more than 50 articles and 13 books. He is considered an authority on the American frontier, as well as a variety of topics pertaining to the South. His 1937 *"A History of Kentucky"* is considered a classic history textbook. His account of the history of a Southern country store, published in 1944 as "*Pills, Petticoats and Plows,"* is one of his popular early books. Another significant accomplishment was his role as editor for two multi-volume historical sets that were published between 1956 and 1962: *"Travels in the Old South"* and *"Travels in the New South."* Clark continues to write and is currently working on the history of Kentucky's two governor's mansions.

Because of research materials preserved in archival quarters, such as UK's Special Collections, the Kentucky History Center, and the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, *Kentucky Alumnus* is able to present our readers with this portfolio of photos.

**"In one meeting in 1965, Tom Clark convinced me that Kentucky should reform its public schools, grow the university to academic greatness, write a new constitution, and save its soils, streams, and forests."**

Al Smith, political commentator, 1993

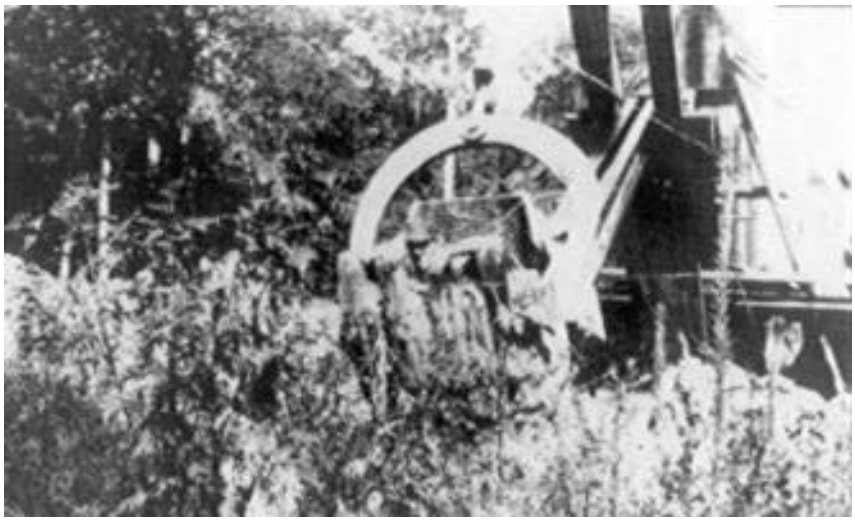
**Clark, top right, with his Siblings**
(photo from Kentucky History Center)

Clark is a Mississippian by birth, but a Kentuckian at heart. Thomas Dionysius Clark was born on July 14, 1903 in Louisville, Miss. He's pictured here with four of his five siblings (a second sister was not yet born) and Sears, his grandfather's dog. ("My grandfather had two pups. He named one Sears and the other Roebuck.")

Clark's father was a cotton farmer and his mother was a schoolteacher. He credits his mother with instilling a love of history in him. "At times she got fact and legend mixed up; it was hard to sort them out; but nevertheless she had a real historical interest." *The Filson Club History Quarterly, July 1986*

**Clark on the Dipper of a Dredge Boat**
(photo from Kentucky History Center)

Clark quit school after the seventh grade. He worked for two years as a farmer, then at a sawmill, and another two years as a cabin boy and deck hand on a dredge boat cutting a channel through the Tallahega Swamp.



**Clark in Football Attire for the Choctaw County Agricultural High School**
(photo courtesy of Dr. Thomas Clark)

In 1921, the 18-year old Clark began attending the Choctaw County Agricultural High School. Although Clark had never seen nor played football before, the principal saw to it that he was put on the team and played for four years. Clark graduated in 1925 and set out for the University of Mississippi to study law, using the money he made from raising 10 acres of cotton.

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**"The person teaching history has to deal with a certain amount of emotion — all the way. I know that as a practicing historian who serves in the classroom year in and year out — that once in a while I touch on a sensitive nerve and I have somebody 'jumping down my throat.' Because what I said, what I wrote on a piece of paper, didn't conform with his opinion. We're dealing, every step of the way, with prejudices. We are also dealing with *changing* prejudices, changing emotions. What sensitizes the people today may not sensitize them tomorrow. A perfectly harmless thing today may become a major issue with them tomorrow."**

from *"History as a Basic Subject,"* a transcript of remarks by Dr. Clark at the June 1960 conference of publisher Lyons and Carnahan

## Clark after Graduating from High School

(photo from UK Special Collections)

**The Early Professional Years**

At Ole Miss, historian Charles Sacket Sydnor played a large part in steering Clark toward obtaining a history degree. He completed most of the four-year course work in three years, and finished his remaining work at the University of Virginia. With his Ole Miss degree in hand, he wanted to start work on a master's degree. Having the good fortune of small scholarships from the University of Cincinnati and the University of Kentucky, Clark flipped a coin to make his decision. UK won and Clark traveled to Lexington by train in 1928. He earned his master's degree from UK in 1929.

Clark began his 37-year career at UK in 1931 as an instructor in the history department while anticipating his doctoral degree, which would be conferred by Duke University in 1932. His responsibilities at UK also included helping to increase UK library resource materials. He did this, day-by-day, always on the lookout for documents that might be of scholarly interest to researchers. His persistence and resourcefulness provided the foundations for Special Collections at the University.

In 1933 his first book, *"The Beginning of the L and N,"* was published. He was a popular teacher who filled his lectures with humor and anecdote. He did much to continue to improve the department and the quality of its instruction throughout his rise to department chairman in 1942. During World War II, Clark held the department together, at one point enlisting the aid of football coach Albert D. Kirwan to help teach history classes.

By his own count, Clark says he probably taught 25,000 students during his stay at UK. Throughout that period, Clark lobbied for document and artifact preservation and construction of appropriate archival facilities. Noted as a popular speaker, he also lectured at many other schools: Harvard, Duke, North Carolina, and Stanford, to name a few. He also taught at the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies in Austria, Oxford University, and in Greece and Yugoslavia. In 1953 at the request of the U.S. State Department, Clark spent several months lecturing in India.

Among his many accomplishments, he joined forces with others to lobby for a university press. That goal — one he is most proud of — was realized in 1943 with the creation of The University of Kentucky Press and again in 1968 with the University Press of Kentucky.

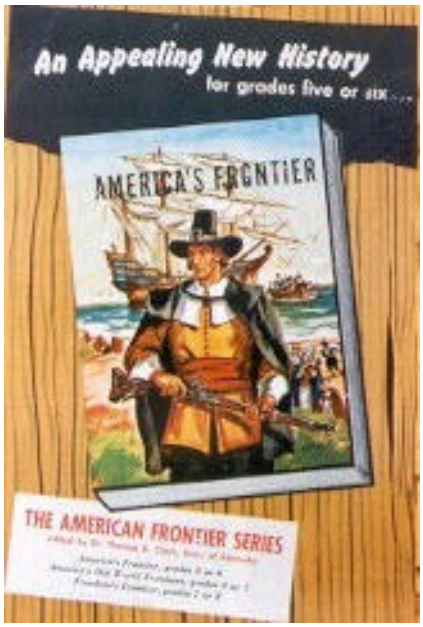
## Clark in Costume for History Film

(photo from UK Special Collections)

In 1941 a New York company filmed *"The Pioneers of Kentucky"* at Ft. Boonesborough for use in schools. Clark was the historical advisor for the film and also appeared in several scenes, along with many residents from Harrodsburg. ("They didn't want professional actors. They wanted people to act natural . . .There was a man over there who had never seen a picture of himself until he was cast on the screen. It was quite a shock to him.")

**The Book Thieves**
(photo from Kentucky History Center)

In the fall of 1931, Clark began meeting on some Saturdays with Charles R. Staples and J. Winston Coleman Jr. to discuss history books and collecting. The group grew and its members adopted the name "The Book Thieves." ("We never had any formal officers, no talks . . . just book talk and gossip.") All members developed noteworthy book collections or wrote memorable history books. Left to right, Samuel M. Wilson, Claude W. Trapp, John S. Chambers, J. Winston Coleman Jr., Frank L. McVey, William H. Townsend, Thomas D. Clark, and Charles R. Staples. Herman Lee Donovan was also a member.




**"*America's Frontier*" was published in 1956**
(photo from UK Special Collections)

Clark edited *America's Frontier"* for children in grades 5 and 6. The book read like a storybook and was abundantly illustrated with pictures and maps.

## The Distinguished Years

(photo from UK Special Collections)

Clark was chairman of the UK History Department from 1942 until 1965. He was a distinguished professor from 1950 through 1968. He is pictured here, with his typewriter, on his last day at UK. (Clark still doesn't use a computer to write. "I'm simpatico with the typewriter.")

From 1968 to 1973 he was at Indiana University as Distinguished Service Professor to write the history of IU. After his stint at IU, he taught on the campuses of Eastern Kentucky University as distinguished professor, the University of Wisconsin as visiting professor, and Winthrop College as adjunct professor.

## Clark with Virgin Pine in South Carolina

(photo from the Kentucky History Center)

**Conservationist at Heart**

Living in an area of virgin timber and working at a sawmill as a teenager helped to solidify Clark's love of the land and conservationist views. A believer in revitalizing land that has been ravaged by erosion or man, Clark practices what he preaches. He plants and maintains woodland in Eastern Kentucky and South Carolina. For the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Clark walked his land with sculptor Bobby Reed Falwell and helped to select 28 different species of trees that would be used to craft a large sculpture for the lobby of the building. The piece is a 24-foot long, 12-foot high abstract rendering of the state map. One of the pieces of wood in the sculpture (the darkest area on the "map") is a board given to Clark 50 years ago that was a part of one of the original buildings at Ft. Boonesborough.

## Kentucky in Wood

(photo from the Kentucky History Center)

## Clark and The Lexington History Museum

(photo courtesy of The Lexington History Museum Inc.)

Clark continues to champion the cause for historical preservation as president and chairman of the Lexington History Museum Inc. This organization is interested in renovating the 100-year-old Fayette County Courthouse on Main Street for use as a local history museum. In July, he disclosed early plans for the structure with a group of supporters. Tentative plans call for the museum to share the building with the UK Art Museum.

# “Preservation of Southern Historical Documents”

**excerpts from a paper by Dr. Thomas D. Clark, read at a meeting of The Friends of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, N.C., on May 11, 1951**

*Note: Thomas D. Clark has put forth “words of wisdom” about preserving historical documents, artifacts, and photographs over the years, and many of his comments are as appropriate today as when they were first spoken.* Kentucky Alumnus *magazine is reprinting excerpts from this speech Dr. Clark delivered almost 50 years ago . . . an address that still provides lessons to be learned, and an interesting look at our ever-changing language.*

Gathering materials for a university collection is a delicate undertaking, and the man who assumes such a job has to have the sense of humor of a clown, the patience of Job, and the integrity of Caesar’s wife; and even then he will come home about half of the time branded a thief! I do not suppose there is any area of human relationships where well-meaning people can be more whimsical about a gentleman’s agreement than in parting with family manuscripts.

Collecting historical records is possibly one of the most thrilling businesses a person can engage in, this side of swallowing fire, handling snakes at a Holy Roller meeting, or tracking down international spies. He can, within a short time, find himself in almost as many unanticipated situations as an imaginative who-done-it author could place him in. On one occasion in southern Kentucky I was on the hot trail of a set of records, and in the search I was told I would have to see an old gentleman who was lying ill in a nearby house. When I approached the door I was greeted in the most hushed manner and was ushered into the bedroom of a poor old emaciated gentleman who could hardly speak above a whisper and whose memory was even more faltering. I did get from him his consent for me to have the records. Actually, I was talking to a man literally on his death bed and already at the very threshold of eternity.

On another occasion I called at a very fine old southern mansion, surrounded with much of the moonlight and roses background. After I had virtually knocked the facing off of the front door, a slickly-shined black boy came out, dressed in a white coat drawn over work clothes, and asked me abruptly what I wanted. I told him I wished to see his mistress and he took me around back of the house and up an outside set of stairs and into a bedroom where I found the good lady in a somewhat more than partial state of undress. This was the first day the boy in the white coat had served as houseman.

Not all of the incidents of manuscript collecting, however, are associated with the cold hand of death or the embarrassment of standing in the bedroom of a partially dressed lady. Much of manuscript collection consists of tedious diplomacy and downright physical drudgery. But whatever it is, it requires a strong nerve and infinite patience.

The horror stories of southern manuscripts are not too good for either a collector's blood pressure or his peace of mind. I could write an eloquent story, I think, on the subject of the statement, "I burned that two years ago." Perhaps one story will suffice on this point. Some years ago when I was searching for records in Mississippi, a dear friend and college-mate of mine told me about an unusually fine collection of papers, which he was sure I could have. His description was so exciting that I persuaded him to get in the car with me and go that night to interview the owner. After driving over 20 miles of Mississippi gravel roads, we arrived at the gentleman's house and found him extremely hospitable. He confirmed my friend's statement that he had a great pile of letters and papers in a store attic, but it was so dark and the doorway to the attic was so treacherously located that he did not want to undertake climbing up there until daylight. He asked me to come back the next day and promised that I could have the papers. The next morning, as soon as it was daylight, I was on my way. We procured a ladder, opened the door in the gable end of the store, and climbed up. He went up first and just as he stuck his head in the opening he shouted, "I'll be damned." I knew it was useless for me to go farther; the tone of his voice reeked with bad news. Someone, unknown to him, had cleaned out the attic, and upon inquiry it was found that the old papers had been hauled off and burned.

Literally millions of pounds of papers have been destroyed either by fire or by being dumped into gullies to prevent erosion caused by the wasteful system of southern land usage. On one or two occasions I have fished badly deteriorated papers out of waterlogged heaps in fields. But fire, rats, mice, and leaky roofs are minor enemies compared to maiden ladies and efficient housekeepers. A rat or mouse can nibble away only enough paper to make a bed or cut a passage, but the good housekeeper's actions are almost invariably positive and final. Everything she cannot dust away with a mop, she burns. A few years ago I discovered that an intimate friend of mine, an excellent housekeeper but also the wife of a husband who had suddenly arrived at the doorway of literary fame, was burning his letters and papers. Fortunately she had, at the time of this discovery, burned only the first dribble of letters and practically none of his other papers; and I persuaded her to clutter up her house enough to keep the papers.

A new bride in an old house can play havoc with old wallpaper, woodwork, and furniture arrangement, and can cheerfully destroy the contents of old chests, trunks, and attics in general. When I read the society page on Sunday, I wonder how many manuscript burners there are in the weekly round-up! The new bride, who is out to display her housekeeping before her husband and her in-laws, is a cold, calculating creature with no sentiment about the "old things." All she wants to know is whether the stuff will burn.

But the maiden lady is an altogether different problem. She is most often the keeper of the sacred name and honor of the family, and her sense of these precious responsibilities becomes intensified with each succeeding year of single blessedness. People get the notion that their private letters will always carry the intimate connotations that they were meant to convey at the time they were written. There are few statements that will chill the manuscript collector like the one, "I just can't let you have Grandpa's and Grandma's old papers. They said such intimate things to each other." Or, the maiden ladies say, "There just might be something in them that we don't see that would disgrace us." This kind of egomania has prevented many a valuable paper from reaching the proper depository.

Family quarrels can result in some astounding decisions pertaining to papers, too. An impulsive brother or a hot-headed sister, fed up with the squabbling, throws the papers away or has them burned to settle the row. Nearly as bad, they may divide the records page by page until the documents are so badly jumbled and scattered that only a patient sleuth can ever track them down or restore their original order. Sometimes, however, a family quarrel will play into the hands of a collector — if he arrives at the right moment.

I do want to pay tribute to the maiden lady to whom, perhaps, I have been unreasonably harsh. She is perhaps, after all, the biggest asset in preserving manuscripts. It is she who has clung to the old family papers. She has often preserved them as the living embodiments of her family, and many are the family collections which have been disposed of sensibly by the surviving female. It is she who knows where the papers are and what the family relations are, and who can recall many of the incidents that resulted in their creation.

It is an irony of fate that papers have a habit of getting into the hands of queer people. I have at least half a dozen notes in my desk at the moment telling me of the location of papers and bearing the trite admonition, “Be most tactful, because the owners are down-right peculiar.” Personally, I like them peculiar — because that means I will eventually get the papers! Everybody is in a certain sense peculiar; but I have found the owners of manuscripts are frequently just peculiar in the eyes of their neighbors, or merely peculiar on one subject, such as Presidential policies, local option, the income tax, or the right-of-way for a new road.

I recall once going to call about the second-most significant collection of papers I ever acquired. I was told by a brother of the man on whom I was to call that he himself would give me the papers but that he didn’t know about his brother. In customary language he warned me, “That brother of mine is as curious as hell, and he may order you out of the house.” I knocked timidly on the “curious” man’s door, and a fog-horn bellow invited me to come in; the “prospect” was in bed. I went down a long hall to a bedroom door, and there lay the man in bed, with an evil-looking Colt forty-five strapped to a bedpost. I sat down and talked to the bed-ridden man for a few minutes. By accident I discovered that he had been a bank clerk in the little town where I went to high school, and in a few minutes we were talking about everybody and their bird dogs in the village. My getting the records became only incidental. My new-found friend told me that not only could I have the papers in the old storehouse, but also I might have his attic-full of papers if I could persuade his sister to help me get them.

Here I learned a little more fully a lesson that every manuscript collector should repeat to himself every day: Don’t talk too much; and don’t ask for everything in the first interview. When I went to see the sister she immediately raised that fateful question, “Do we want to let Papa’s papers get into the hands of a stranger?” I went away for a few weeks to let the case cool off, and then I came back to reopen it. This time I did my best at softening up the lady, and finally she consented to my taking the first set of records her brother had given me, but on what I considered a hard condition. The bulk of the records was large and my supply of pasteboard boxes limited. She said that a corpse was to arrive on the train at 4 o’clock and if I could pack the records and get away before it arrived, I could have them. That was the first time I was entered in a dead heat with a corpse, but the fact that the corpse had no choice and was traveling on the Southern Railway was a most fortunate break for me. Just as the belated train came into sight I was getting into my car, with the bills of lading in my pocket.

Frequently a man with a local reputation for being “curious” is only cantankerous. I once went to see an old gentleman whose father had been most active in the affairs of his community in middle Tennessee. His son had preserved his records in barrels and boxes stored in an outhouse. They were, nevertheless, in good condition; and more important, they were complete so far as I could tell. He let me have the papers without much tedious discussion, but before I could get back to the University of Kentucky, he wrote the comptroller a letter that seemed to indicate that if I were not a thief I was in at least an advanced embryo stage of becoming one. When we were able to satisfy him that I was able to walk about Lexington in the daylight and that his records had arrived safely, he seemed to be satisfied. Later, after the papers were cataloged and filed, he wrote us to return them. We shipped the papers back immediately, and I

again called on the old gentleman. He said that I could have the papers — that he had only wanted to see if we would return them. I overloaded my car with these papers and drove over most of middle Tennessee during an express company strike before I could get an office to ship them. But — woe unto us — the old gentleman asked for his papers a second time, and so far as I know they are now back in the outhouse!

**Clark and his Treasure**
(Photo from UK Special Collections)

Thomas Clark spent about a year between 1941 to 1942 on sabbatical collecting old records and other material from country store merchants while traveling all over the South. “That’s a gold mine of material Southern historians had never tapped,” Clark said. He is shown here examining his bounty in the basement of the M. I. King library after shipping the items back to Lexington in the early 1940s. He researched the material and used it as the basis for his popular 1944 book, *“Pills, Petticoats and Plows.”*

The UK Alumni Association joins Dr. Clark today in reminding you that you are a part of the history of UK and are likely to have documents and snapshots pertaining to events that took place while on campus. We all know that not all of what’s packed in boxes in the garage is noteworthy, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If you are not sure of an item’s historical value, please ask before destroying it. Contact UK Special Collections at 859-257-8611 if you have documents or photographs that you think UK might be interested in.